DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 051 532 CG 006 465

AUTHOR O'Neill, Michael
TITLE Adaptation and Integration in the Nuclear Family: Some Thoughts on the Current Status of the Theory.
INSTITUTION Utah Univ., Salt Lake City.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Conceptual Schemes, Family (Sociological Unit), Family Characteristics, Family Relationship, Family Role, *Family Structure, *Individual Differences, Models, *Parent Role, Personality, Role Perception, Social Environment, *Social Integration, Social Systems

ABSTRACT

The paper briefly outlines some of the factors which influence the differentiation of leadership roles in the nuclear family, such that it may or may not occur, and that it may or may not occur along lines of sexual identity. Three general categories of factors are discussed: (1) the impact of individual differences in the family members; (2) the effect of differences in family composition and membership; and (3) the influence of variations in situation, context and manner of assessment of the families. The published critiques are viewed as not invalidating the differentiation concepts of Parsons and Bales, but rather as demonstrating their richness and complexity. Some empirical questions are presented which are posed by the theory and subsequent research. (Author/TL)

ED051532

Adaptation and Integration in the Nuclear Family: Some thoughts on the current status of the theory

Michael O'Neill
University of Utah

ABSTRACT

In the years since Bales (1951) and Parsons and Bales (1955) presented their notions of the differentiation of leadership roles into adaptive and integrative functions, arguments and data have been presented in support and in disagreement. It is becoming clear that there are many variables which enter into whether or not leadership roles become differentiated, and that the relationships between these variables are complex. The present paper briefly outlines some of the factors which influence the differentiation, such that it may or may not occur, and that it may or may not occur along lines of sexual identity. Three general categories of factors are discussed: the impact of individual differences in the people making up the family; the effect of differences in family composition and membership; and the influence of variations in situation, context and manner of assessment of the families. The published critiques of the theory do not seem to invalidate the concepts, but rather demonstrate the richness and the complexity of the variables and their interactions. Some empirical questions are presented which are posed by the theory and subsequent research.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

CG 006 405

Adaptation and Integration in the Nuclear Family:
Some thoughts on the current status of the theory

Michael O'Neill
University of Utah

In the years since Bales (1951) and Parsons and Bales (1955) presented their theory of the differentiation of leadership roles in small groups into adaptive and integrative functions, arguments and data have been presented in support and in disagreement. What has become clear is that such differentiation is not as absolute and as ultimate as its authors first suggested, but that it is influenced by a plethora of general and specific interacting variables. Particularly in the nuclear family, empirical work has suggested that leadership functions are not cleanly divided between instrumental and expressive types, and not simply allocated at all times and in all situations according to the sex of the parent.

At the heart of the Parsons and Bales theoretical structure are the two systems problems imposed on all groups: (1) the requirement that social groups adapt to externally imposed tasks, deal with the objective environments of which they are a part, and at the same time (2) maintain the social relationships of the group members, keeping the group a group, dealing with the integrative needs of the members. Because of conflicting behavioral demands of these two needs, the theory postulates that different group members emerge to lead the group in the performance of the two functions: the task or instrumental specialist facilitates the group's adaptation to its external environment, while the social-emotional or expressive specialist is most active in maintaining the integration of the members into the group.

Bales' initial postulation of this differentiation (1951) resulted from his work with small decision-making groups, then Parsons and Bales (1955) applied the concept to the nuclear family, adding the qualification that, not only does

the differentiation occur in the nuclear family, but that leadership roles in the family are allocated according to sex, with the father taking the instrumental role and the mother the expressive role. This sex-linked role allocation is an integral part of a broader scheme of the socialization process, and is thus a vital part of the entire theoretical structure proposed by Parsons.

Empirical support for these notions has been less than conclusive, and seemingly always qualified by special conditions. The result has been disaffection with the theory (see, for example, Slater, 1961) and criticisms that it has been relied upon too heavily as an explanatory force with too little supportive data (Rossi, 1968). Thus, workers appear to have gone from initial enthusiasm and acceptance of the theory as an answer to the problems of all groups (as Rossi, 1968, says, "applied in an indiscriminate way to all manner of social phenomena") to a position of disfavor and near rejection. That this progression is not unknown in psychological science (c.f. Schofield, 1964, with reference to theories of psychotherapy, and Megargee, 1966, with reference to the use of psychological tests, especially the Rorschach) suggests that what is to follow now is a realistic acceptance of the strengths and weaknesses of the theory of role differentiation, with an unfettered evaluation of when it is and is not applicable. There is accumulating empirical evidence to suggest the nature of the conditions which influence such differentiation, as well as to indicate further empirical questions which need evaluation yet.

At this point there is evidence to suggest that the nature and extent of leadership role differentiation in the nuclear family are influenced by three broad categories of variables: individual differences in the people making up the family, differences in family composition and membership, and variations in situation, context and manner of assessment of families.

Individual Differences in the People Making Up the Family

One broad class of factors influencing role differentiation includes individual differences in the family members: the category "father" includes a wide range of personal and personality styles, with infinite variety of reinforcement histories and cognitive styles; so, too, with mothers, and with children. Especially in view of the number of combinations and interactions possible among these different "types" of people, it seems unlikely that any simple linear predictions vis a vis leadership will hold true.

Consider, for example, the early work of Slater (1955) with role differentiation, where individual differences in tendency to specialize are reported: in small experimental groups, subjects who showed the greatest tendency toward role specialization also tended to report that their own parents had achieved some instrumental-expressive differentiation in the home.

Beyond this, a body of evidence is accumulating suggesting that men and women differ in their propensity to task-versus relationship-orientation. Fiedler (1965), in work with the Least Preferred Co-worker scale, reports reliable individual differences with predictive usefulness, as does Bass (1961) with the Personal Orientation Inventory.

In brief, there are suggestions of personality variables which influence the degree to which differentiation will occur, and the directions along which it will occur if it does. This is an area of immense importance and potential for empirical research. Relationships must be specified between differentiation behavior and such factors as internal-external locus of control, authoritarianism, cognitive style and intelligence, anxiety and perhaps even various clinical syndromes.

Personality variables are not the only type of individual differences that can be found in the members of different families. Bronfenbrenner and his associates (e.g., 1961) report consistent differences in reported parental behavior as a function of the father's educational level, related as well to socioeconomic status of the family. From work with the Parental Activity Inventory, Bronfenbrenner has found that as one ascends the educational ladder, less differentiation is found: educated fathers are more likely to assume integrative as well as adaptive functions. Bott's (1960) findings substantiate this relationship.

Related as well, in some complex fashion, are the occupational roles of the fathers (Slater, 1961), which influence directly the amount of time available inthe family, and the compatibility of the behavior demanded by the job and in the home (Rossi, 1968).

In general, then, there are many ways a father in one family may differ from a father in another family, and at least some of these have been demonstrated to influence leadership role differentiation. The precise nature and extent of influence is yet to be determined, but it is an empirical question.

Differences in Family Composition and Membership

It is a mistake to assume that all families, regardless of their characteristics, are equivalent with regard to the differentiation process. There are differences between families which influence the degree to which leadership functions will be performed by two separate family members, and which parent will perform which role if the differentiation does occur. In the first place, an important consideration is the size of the family. As Cartwright and Zander (1960) suggest, differentiation is much more likely to occur in large organizations, where the demands for integration become so great that they cannot reasonably be expected

to be performed by the same person who is attempting to coordinate the physical resources of the group, which have likewise become greater. With particular reference to the family, Levinger (1964) failed to find significant differentiation when dealing with marital dyads; on the contrary, with only two people there was a sharing of the leadership roles.

In a related vein, Leik (1963) reported a negative relationship between intimacy and role specialization: in closer-knit and more intimate groups, there was a decided tendency to share integrative and adaptive functions. To the extent that family size is related to the intimacy of the relationships, particularly in a face-to-face situation, this negative correlation will apply to small versus large families.

The sex of the children has a significant effect on the directions that role differentiation occurs in the family, according to the work of Bronfenbrenner (1962). In a reliable fashion, fathers have been found to be more task-oriented toward sons and social-emotional toward daughters, while the opposite holds true for mothers, who are task-oriented to their daughters and social-emotional toward sons. It remains an empirical question to evaluate the direction of specialization in families with all daughters, compared to those with all sons, but it seems not unlikely that patterns will be found to be different in a significant way. The extent to which variations on this theme influence other research is yet undetermined.

Families differ as well in the degree to which they are a part of larger systems, and the extent to which they rely on external social groups, including the larger family, the schools, churches and social groups, to help them structure their worlds and raise their children. Bott (1960) for example, distinguishes between "loose-knit networks" in which friends, neighbors and

relatives of the family tend not to know each other, and "close-knit networks" in which the people known by a family tend more often to interact also with one another.

In close-knit networks, Bott reported a tendency for rigid division of labor to occur, with little stress on the value of shared interests and responsibilities. With other systems so readily available, fathers, for example, apparently feel little need to help their wives in many of the responsibilities they must assume, and likewise the wives share few of the husbands' duties.

By contrast, families in loose-knit networks, that is, loosely organized or ill-defined systems, there was a less rigid division of labor, with a greater emphasis upon shared duties and responsibilities. In other words, with no outside people to help out, husbands and wives show a greater propensity toward helping each other, and subsequently their leadership roles are much less sharply defined.

In summary, a variety of factors make for differences between families that influence the differentiation of leadership roles, and any meaningful and accurate predictions about family behavior will necessarily have to take these into account. Again, many empirical questions remain regarding the precise nature and impact of these variables.

Situational and Contextual Variations

The categories of variables that have been discussed to this point provide some overview of some broad-based factors which exert long-standing, stable influences. At the same time, there appear to be factors which effect briefer, sometimes even momentary and certainly less stable changes in family leadership differentiation (Waxler and Mishler, 1970).

The findings of O'Rourke (1963) for example suggest that in an artificial laboratory setting, role differentiation is more likely to occur along traditional sex-lines than in a natural home situation. In the laboratory, fathers were observed to take the instrumental role, mothers the expressive. In the home, fathers drop in instrumentality and mothers increase; mothers drop in expressiveness and fathers increase.

Related to this finding is the study by Leik (1963), mentioned above, reporting a negative relationship between intimacy and familiarity on the one hand, and role differentiation on the other. In more intimate and/or familiar situations, with closer people, the stereotyped and socially-acceptable leadership behaviors appear to not be performed so rigidly and predictably: role differentiation is less common.

Then there is the entire category of family behavior as a function of specific task characteristics and demands, an area which is only now starting to become an area of interest (e.g., O'Neill and Alexander, 1970). At a pure content level, there are some tasks which could more easily be defined by cultural stereotypes as distinctly "male" or "female" tasks, and it seems not unlikely that presenting a family with a variety of such tasks would elicit substantially different patterns of leadership. In fact, a beginning effort was made in this area by March (1954), using political discussions. In different topic areas, husbands and wives dominance patterns did differ in a significant fashion.

The relevance of task factors has been much more closely evaluated by investigators of small laboratory and decision-making groups than by investigators of the human family. The extent of generalizability of findings awaits empirical validation, but it seems reasonable to suggest some correspondence

between the populations. Shaw (1963) has catalogued several dimensions of task characteristics relevant to small group activity, and Fiedler (1965) has demonstrated the differential impact of these dimensions on leadership behavior. Included among these dimensions are task difficulty, structure, interest and intellectual demands.

Moreover, the extent to which the task is accepted as a major goal of the group members appears to influence the degree and nature of role differentiation. Burke (1968) and Turk (1961) both report findings which suggest that there is a negative relationship between task acceptance and role differentiation: the more the task is accepted as a goal by all members of the group, the less the need for a separate expressive leader. This is, of course, compatible with studies of the morale of industrial groups, considering morale as the extent to which the members of the group consider the group goal to be consistent with their own personal goals (Stagner, 1958).

As before, a good deal of empirical work is needed to establish the exact extent of influence of these variables, as well as their interaction effects, with each other and with the other categories discussed.

The empirical work done to date suggests the complexity of the variables involved but does not invalidate the concepts of the role differentiation theory. As in other areas of science, more questions have been generated about the family and its leadership behavior than have been answered by this theory, but it could be argued that this is an important function of any good theory in psychology.

References

Bales, R. F. Interaction process analysis. Cambridge: Addison-Wesley 1951.

Bass, B. M. Behavior in groups. Techn. Rep. 25. Contr. N7 ONR 35609. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univer. 1961.

Bott, Elisabeth. Conjugal roles and social networks. In N. W. Bell and E. F. Vogel (Eds.), A modern introduction to the family. Glencoe: Free Press, 1960.

Bronfenbrenner, U. Some familial antecedents of responsibility and leadership in adolescents. In L. Petrullo and B. M. Bass (Eds.), Leadership and interpersonal behavior. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961. Pp. 239-271

Burke, P. J. Role differentiation and the legitimation of task activity. Sociometry, 1968, 31, 404-411.

Cartwright, D., & Zander, A. Group dynamics: Research and theory (2nd ed.) Evanston: Row, Peterson, 1960.

Fiedler, F. E. Engineer the job to fit the manager. Harvard Business Review, 1965, 43, 115-122.

Leik, R. K. Instrumentality and emotionality in family interaction. Sociom., 1963, 26, 131-145.

Levinger, G. Task and social behavior in marriage. Sociom., 1964, 27, 433-448.

March, J. Husband-wife interaction over political issues. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1954, 17, 461-470.

Megargee, E. I. Research in clinical assessment. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

O'Neill, M., & Alexander, J. F. Family interaction patterns as a function of task characteristics. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1970 (in press).

O'Rourke, V. Field and laboratory: The decision-making behavior of family groups in two experimental conditions. Sociom., 1963, 26, 422-435.

Parsons, T., & Bales, R. F. Family, socialization and interaction process. Glencoe: Free Press, 1955.

Rossi, A. S. Transition to parenthood. J. Marr. & the Fam., 1968, 30, 26-39.

Schofield, W. Psychotherapy, the purchase of friendship. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Shaw, M. E. Scaling group tasks: A method for dimensional analysis (Techn. Rept. No. 1, ONR contract NR 170-266, Nonr.580(11)) Gainesville: Univer. of Florida, 1963.

Slater, P. E. Psychological factors in role specialization. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1955.

Stagner, R. Motivational aspects of industrial morale. Personnel Psychology, 1958, 11, 64-70.

Turk, H. Instrumental values and the popularity of instrumental leaders. Social Forces, 1961, 39, 252-260.

Waxler, Nancy E., & Mishler, E. G. Experimental studies of families. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology. New York: Academic Press, Vol. 6, 1971. Pp. 249-304.